DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 809 HE 030 702

AUTHOR	Iannozzi, Maria
TITLE	Policy Perspectives. Exemplars. Alverno College.
INSTITUTION	Pew Higher Education Roundtable, Philadelphia, PA; Knight Collaborative, Akron, OH.; Pennsylvania Univ., Philadelphia. Inst. for Research on Higher Education.
SPONS AGENCY	John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Miami, FL.
PUB DATE	1997-08-00
NOTE	9p.; For related documents, see HE 030 703-704. Published in conjunction with "Policy Perspectives."
AVAILABLE FROM	Exemplars Institute for Research on Higher Education, 4200 Pine St., 5A, Philadelphia, PA 19104-4090; phone: 1-800-437-9799.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Curriculum; College Faculty; College Instruction; College Students; *Competency Based Education; Curriculum Design; *Curriculum Development; Curriculum Evaluation; Educational Attitudes; Educational Change; Excellence in Education; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; Nongraded Student Evaluation; Performance Based Assessment; Portfolio Assessment; *Private Colleges; Relevance (Education); *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Alverno College WI

ABSTRACT

This report describes efforts by Alverno College (Wisconsin) to reform the traditional liberal arts curriculum and redefine the relevance of women's colleges. Beginning in the early 1970s, the college began to refocus student learning by integrating ability development and performance-based knowledge. Faculty and staff redefined the curriculum, basing requirements not just on disciplinary content but also on the mastery and application of eight abilities: communication, analysis, problem solving, values in decision making, social interaction, global perspectives, effective citizenship, and aesthetic responsiveness. Rather than assigning letter grades, the college registrar keeps track of students' mastery of each ability, based on student work that becomes part of an extensive portfolio. The college also draws upon the experience of 600 external assessors to help evaluate students' progress. To develop and refine the college's changing curriculum, each faculty member is affiliated with both an academic department and an ability area, and each year faculty engage in three week-long institutes to address the curriculum. Comments from students and an administrator on the effectiveness of the college's curriculum are included. (MDM)

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PERSPECTIVES
August 1997

Exemplars Exemplars

ED 414 809

Alverno College

The Problem: ***National and local questions raised doubts about the relevance of women's colleges and suggested that traditional liberal arts curricula had failed to prepare students to become effective citizens and life-long learners.***

The Solution: ***Refocus liberal education on student learning through the integration of ability development and knowledge that is assessed through performance.***

"As an education major, I marvel at what Alverno has done to bring its curriculum to this point," says adult student Toni Vitrano, who adds that her experience at Alverno has prepared her to think critically and act confidently in any situation. The path that led to the development of the College's innovative and highly successful ability-based curriculum began 25 years ago. Its president, Sister Joel Read, recalls: "Like many others at the time, we were observing a dichotomy between what was going on in 'life' and what was going on in the classroom." These observations were punctuated by national discussions questioning the relevance of women's colleges, as well as local ones regarding the need for so many private institutions—nearly indistinguishable from one another—in the Milwaukee area.

Faculty were asked: "What is so important about your field of study that students cannot afford to pass up courses in your department?" From the responses and meetings that followed, commonalties emerged that centered on what students need to know and what they must be able to do. The discovery of this common

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ground enabled faculty to then ask: "How can we focus the disciplines on student learning?" Alverno's solution, according to President Read, "was to define a liberal education not solely as bodies of knowledge to be acquired but rather to develop within the student those thought processes—or abilities—through which the disciplines have evolved." Alverno arrived at eight fundamental abilities that would become the basis for defining its degree, created an administrative structure for each ability that parallels the structure of discipline-based departments, and recast the process by which the College assesses student learning performance.

The curriculum was redefined by basing requirements not just on disciplinary content but also on the mastery and application of eight abilities—those skills that help students succeed not only in the classroom but also in the world outside the academy. The abilities, such as communication, analysis, and problem solving, are continually applied in all courses, and some in very surprising ways. "After calculating a problem in one of my math courses," explains Toni, "I had to write a paragraph that described in detail how I arrived at the solution: what thought processes and math functions I used, and why. Math has always been a problem for me, but having to apply the writing ability in math courses helped me to explicitly focus on how—not just what—I learned." In order to relate abilities to discipline-specific curricular content, Alverno defined six levels of increasing complexity for each area that a student is expected to demonstrate as she progresses through her course of study.

And demonstrate they do. "Practice is built into every course," says Mary Diez, dean of the education department. "Information only becomes knowledge when it is used or applied, so knowledge in content areas is made stronger because students are continually forced to ask themselves, 'What does this mean and how can I use this information?'" The abilities they master become frameworks for learning that are continually applied and built upon—so that, as Professor Diez explains, students "never get to forget anything

they've learned. They can never say, 'Been there, done that.' They're continually going back there, and doing it again—only at increasing levels of complexity."

The assignments faculty devise to stress the application of knowledge vary widely, but they are all consistent in their creativity. Students demonstrate their knowledge of a subject through activities such as slide presentations, speeches, or essays geared toward a specific audience, and they are always asked after the fact to contemplate the process undertaken for each assignment. "In a class on Hinduism," says traditional-aged communications major Sara Halpin, "I was asked to write a letter to a friend explaining what its major tenets are. Afterward, I had to assess how I presented the information, why I chose to do it that way, and how I might do it differently."

It is Alverno's conception of assessment that clearly makes the ability-based curriculum a success—both in how faculty evaluate students and in how students are prompted to evaluate themselves. Called "Student Assessment-as-Learning," it relies on the identification of individual students' particular strengths and weaknesses, and on the progress made over time. Rather than assigning letter grades, the College's registrar keeps track of students' mastery of each ability, based on the work that becomes part of an extensive portfolio.

The portfolio contains all manner of examples of student work, including videotapes, which are used primarily to demonstrate a student's progress in public speaking. "As part of a 'placement' assessment on our first day as freshmen, we are asked to write and deliver a three-minute speech that is videotaped," says Sara, "and then we record new speeches over time." She cringes when she thinks about the initial speech on her videotape, but can clearly see how the assessment process improved her ability to give presentations. "Now, I can think on my feet; I can give a presentation in front of a hundred people, and although I might still be nervous, I'm completely poised and prepared."

"Our concept of assessment comes from the derivation of the word: to sit beside," says Professor Diez. "Faculty identify weaknesses and strengths, indicating areas where students require additional input or practice." As each student integrates diagnostic feedback from the assessment into her individual learning style, the institution also integrates information about performance levels into its ongoing refinement of the curriculum and allocation of institutional resources. Faculty benefit as well from this method of assessment; if several students in a course are consistently falling short in a particular ability area, an instructor is then responsible for investigating how a different approach might help them improve.

And while the faculty are responsible for assessing most aspects of student learning, the College also draws upon the experience of 600 external assessors to evaluate students' progress. "As part of my final communications course," says Sara, who graduates this year, "I had to present—almost defend—my portfolio to a professional in the field I was about to enter. It made me think about what I had learned and accomplished, and reminded me where there was still room for development. A job interview seems like an easy prospect after undergoing that process." In addition to benefiting students, external assessment engages the institution in a continuing dialogue with the local business community about the kinds of skills employers require.

Alverno's campus community sets aside substantial time to reflect on the state of this ever-evolving curriculum—that is, to continually assess its own efforts. Each faculty member is affiliated with both an academic department and an ability area and engages in collaboration around course and program design. Classes are not held on Friday afternoons so that faculty can attend regular meetings of the discipline and ability departments, and each year faculty engage in three week-long sessions—called College Institutes—to address changes in student learning and the curriculum. Professor Diez describes how these activities translate in the classroom:

"Because faculty are continually discussing across the campus what is happening in other disciplines, they are better able to make interdisciplinary connections for students. Even a good deal of research is collaborative, and faculty focus scholarship around teaching; in fact, in order to advance to associate professor, an instructor must have had an impact on the curriculum beyond his or her home department."

It is obvious that Alverno College takes seriously the maxim, "practice makes perfect"—for its students and for itself. The accumulation of 25 years of effort, in which faculty, staff, and administrators have constantly revised and updated the curriculum, has created a liberal arts learning experience that prepares students for jobs and for life. As adult student Toni Vitrano explains, "At Alverno, I learned a way of living, a way of explicitly questioning everything I do. Instead of merely accepting facts, I am always prompted to explore further, to continually ask: 'Why?' It's not just a degree, it's something that will stay with me for the rest of my life." And, as Sara Halpin explains, it is also a difference that employers are noticing: "A Wisconsin principal told me that if he's looking through a pile of resumes and comes across an Alverno graduate, he will immediately pick up the phone and call her for an interview. Businesses know that an Alverno graduate is going to make a significant contribution to an organization."

Institutional Statistics:

Private, Catholic, liberal arts college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

2,191 students: **1,289** traditional and **902** in the Weekend College

115 full-time faculty, **82** part-time faculty

Milestones on the Path to Reform:

- In 1968, a new lay Board of Trustees and a new president were inaugurated, precipitating a process of change that has extended over more than two decades.

- In 1970 and 1971, faculty engaged in biweekly meetings to probe the distinctive contributions of their discipline to student learning. They arrived at eight ability areas that every student must master at increasingly sophisticated levels in their discipline courses and internships. The eight ability areas are communication, analysis, problem-solving, values in decision-making, social interaction, global perspectives, effective citizenship, and aesthetic responsiveness.

- Alverno designed an advising program in 1972 that included professional academic advisors, student peer advisors, and specially designed introductory seminars for first-year students.

- In 1972, the College also developed an Assessment Center and recruited and trained hundreds of external assessors from the Milwaukee community. It also created audio-visual studios for use by all faculty and students for the preparation of teaching and learning materials.

- By 1973, Alverno had designed a parallel academic/administrative structure that included discipline departments and multi-disciplinary ability-based departments, each responsible for improving the quality of an integrated content and ability-based curriculum.

- In 1974, it created periods of time for extended discussions, workshops, and evaluations by redesigning the instructional schedule. Faculty meet every Friday afternoon and in week-long institutes every August, January, and May.

- In 1975, Alverno initiated a public dialogue, through campus conferences, with educators and other professionals throughout the country to benefit from criticism and to share

successes and failures. These conferences are held annually and draw about 500 participants.

- It established the Office of Research and Evaluation in 1976 to conduct research on teaching, learning, and assessment issues, including a 15-year study that will be published in 1998.

- In 1976, the College published the first edition of *Liberal Learning at Alverno College*, the first of a continuing series of books and articles by Alverno faculty to explore fundamental educational issues.

- Alverno revised guidelines and expectations for faculty development and promotion in 1977 based on the faculty's evolving definition of the scholarship of teaching.

- In 1980, it ensured that the new departments and funds required for continuous educational transformation—for example, the Office of Research and Evaluation, the Center for Instructional Communications, and Summer Fellowships for Faculty—were integrated into the budget.

- In 1985, Alverno began its work with 21 Milwaukee area K-12 schools to develop teaching approaches incorporating critical thinking across the curriculum.

- In 1989, the College established a consortium of 11 institutions to work together for three years on the improvement of teaching, learning, and assessment across the educational spectrum. The consortium was composed of five educational domains: secondary, community college, college, university, and professional school.

- The Alverno College Board of Trustees in 1993 created the Alverno College Commission on Education in the 21st Century. The Commission, composed of 300 local and national business leaders, educators, public officials, and community volunteers, was asked to assess the College and its future role. The commission assisted the College in sharpening its capability for continual transformation in the coming decades.

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Exemplars **is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and is a publication of the Pew Higher Education Roundtable and the Knight Collaborative.**

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Alverno College is one of three recipients of the 1996 Pew Leadership Award for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education.

The institutional profile for this ***Exemplars*** was researched and written by Maria Iannozzi.

Inquiries should be directed to ***Exemplars***, Institute for Research on Higher Education, 4200 Pine Street, 5A, Philadelphia, PA 19104-4090, or call the Education Line, 1-800-437-9799.
E-mail inquiries should be directed to ***pp-requests@irhe.upenn.edu***
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